

Sarah Coakley symposium – reflections

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Thank you, professor Coakley, for a challenging and insightful presentation. I have to admit that I am – as a systematic theologian – impressed by your radical theological approach to the question of gender. As a Jesuit, however, I felt equally inspired by the spiritual dimensions of your theology. There are some striking similarities between the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits and your theological method on which I briefly would like to comment at the beginning of my reflections.

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola constitute a method that is supposed to help individuals to find God's will and to do it. The origin of Ignatius' rather systematic approach to spiritual life is a personal life crisis he went through as a young man. This crisis is not completely different from the one that Martin Luther experienced and it took place only a few years later. What for Luther was the quest for a merciful God was for Ignatius the question how to find God's will for his life. Both Luther and Ignatius wanted to find religious assurance in the depth of their personal spiritual experiences. And both were convinced that what was revealed to them in the darkness of their personal crisis was *more* than just a personal experience. Their personal spiritual encounter with God had deep implications for how Christians in later generations would experience God.

The Spiritual exercises are an attempt to recreate the experiences of the life crisis of Ignatius – so to say “under controlled circumstances”. The dynamic of the process of these thirty days is that the encounter with God leads to a change of life and this change of thoughts, acts and attitudes opens the retreatant's eyes to God's will. Ignatius is convinced that there is an inner connection between prayer, discipline of life and the ability to know God and recognize

God's will. Here, professor Coakley, I found the first similarity between the spirituality of Saint Ignatius and your *théologie totale*, a theology that is no intellectual abstraction but deeply connected to prayer and asceticism. Theology, speaking about God, will hardly be authentic when it is not enlightened by knowledge of God. As you convincingly argued, quite a lot of misinterpretations in the field of religion would be shown to be pointless if the theologian would keep in mind the transcendence of God as it is experienced in prayer. But there is no prayer without self-knowledge and there is no self-knowledge without discipline. That these virtues ought to be part of the life-style of any person who wants to encounter God is a thought that I find enlightening both in your lecture and in the theology of the “Spiritual exercises” of Saint Ignatius.

There is another similarity that strikes me. It is the focus on “desire”. Ignatius is convinced that following the deepest desires of the heart will guide the person who makes the retreat to God. The crucial psychological disposition during the process of the Spiritual exercises is called “consolation”. “Consolation” is an experience of satisfaction, joy, hope and light that fills the heart and the mind. “Consolation” is what happens when desire touches what it desires. “Consolation” is not an insight but an emotion. “Consolation” is not intellectual but sensual. This, however, makes the outcome of the meditation rather unpredictable. The emotional reaction will, typically, be rather chaotic. It doesn't only reveal the desires a pious person might be looking for, but also the more or less undesired ones. Desire is a complex reality, and being exposed to this emotional chaos so unprotected and during a long period of time is mostly an utterly unsettling experience. These moments of inter-

ruption and confusion have an immense importance for the process of the Spiritual Exercises. They reveal the deep ambiguity of human desires and invite the retreatant to choose between the liberating desires (which eventually lead to greater “consolation”, which means to God) and the enslaving ones (which lead to “desolation”, i.e. away from God).

The quality of the desires that seize the heart is not so much judged on a scale of neutral norms (even though this is also the case) but rather by their ability to liberate the individual to do the will of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. The question is therefore, which potential the different desires of life (sexuality, eating, drinking, money etc.) have to deepen the relationship to God. Do they help or are they an obstacle? The answer to this question is not given by the nature of the desire, as for example that sexuality would be a “bad” desire and, let’s say, the desire to abstain from food for the sake of God would be something intrinsically “good”. Rather, the question, which desire comes from God and which from evil, is deeply personal because the Holy Spirit that guides every person in prayer is deeply personal. The question of the character of our human desire and our relationship to the desire for God can be quite different from one person to another. A decision regarding which turn to give one’s life can therefore be very different from one person to another.

Perhaps in contrast to your approach, “desire” in the Ignatian tradition, even as it is experienced in prayer, is deeply ambiguous. To find out which desire truly leads to God is a difficult and time-consuming process – and it is a rather personal process. Ignatius calls it “ordering one’s life”. This “order” is neither a successful assimilation to cultural expectations nor a blind submission to ecclesiastical discipline. Rather it is the willingness and the ability of the individual to shape one’s life, to give it a form and a direction. This takes me to the question to what extent the experience of God in meditation and prayer can serve as a “locus theologicus” for systematic theology such as seems to be the case in your theology. You have pointed out that the practice of prayer prevents the theologian from ending up in the onto-theological (and a few other) traps. That is a valuable point. The per-

sonal experience of prayer and meditation is a reminder to the theologian that God is transcendent and not an object that can be studied as one studies trees or stones. However, I wonder if this insight *comes* from prayer or if it is just *experienced* in prayer. Personally, I would locate revelation, from where all systematic theology receives its light, more exclusively in the collective setting of the faith of the Christian tradition than in the experience of individual prayer. Of course, these two are not to be separated completely as there is no faith without prayer and as the way we pray forms our faith. However, there is revelation without prayer and systematic theology is the reflection on revelation that to a great extent can be done solely in the realm of reason. Theology, even as a *théologie totale*, is more at home at the “*agora*” than in the “*inner room*”. Revelation is by nature public and so is theology.

I am very much convinced that prayer has an enormous potential to change the way we experience ourselves as men or women. It will also change the way we construct gender. The transforming power of God that you convincingly described in your lecture, re-creates human beings to become who they were created to be. There is a potential in prayer to break up the dichotomies that each culture lays as a burden on the shoulders of those who live in it. The experience of prayer is an experience of transcendence and liberation but it is also an experience of incarnation. It reveals a God who breaks boundaries, overthrows cultural limitations, “casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly”. There is an enormous potential for change in prayer. This does indeed come from within the religious experience – not from without, as you in your lecture so convincingly have argued. The re-creative power of prayer is truly dynamic – in contrast to the mostly static secular concepts of human identity.

But what does the transforming power of God do to the theologian – as theologian? Personally, I would like to situate the transforming role of prayer as follows: first of all, I would state that prayer in the community is of deeper significance than individual prayer. Secondly, I would rather expect the fruits of prayer on the practical than on the theoretical level. To start

with the first point: the general rule that the way people believe is formed by the way they pray (*lex credendi- lex orandi*) is probably not more than a very realistic description of how people come to faith: they find themselves in a situation where believers practice their faith and imitate it. But on a deeper level, “*lex orandi- lex credendi*” can only be understood within the context of the “*sensus fidelium*”, i.e. that the faithful have an internal insight into what is right and wrong in matters of faith. However, this gift is by nature given to a community and not to an individual. Individual convictions will, as John Henry Newman argued, have the tendency to remain personal preferences that are not sufficiently challenged by or synchronized with conflicting preferences of other individuals. The “*sensus fidelium*” is the experience not of an individual but of a community. It expresses itself in common beliefs and in common prayer. These expressions of the Christian faith that are formed by a community of faith seem to me the starting point for any Systematic Theology. Therefore, Christian doctrine, Christian liturgy, moral teaching etc. is the result of a collective quest for God. Or, to put it more theologically: Divine revelation is never given to individuals but always to the community. This is even – and particularly true – where the community “persecutes and kills its prophets” because the denied reception of revelation is merely a special – although dramatic - case of its reception.

Does this mean that it doesn’t matter if – and how much - a theologian prays? Obviously, most or all of the great theologians were or are also prayerful people. However, this fact doesn’t answer the question whether theological work inspires one to pray or if prayer opens one’s mind to theological questions. Arguably, it might work both ways but that does not mean that the better the theologian’s prayer life is, the more illuminated he or she will be in doing theology. Personally, I find it more interesting to have a closer look at the way the *acting* of prayerful people is changed by prayer than to examine how their *theological thinking* is affected. In regard to the question of gender I would expect that it could be a fruitful approach to have a fresh look at the great figures of the Christian tradition (which in the Catholic tradition are called “saints”) and to see what it meant to them to be men or women. There may well be some interesting discoveries there that could be revelatory for our understanding of gender. I would find this approach more fruitful than the opposite method, which is to see the saints rather as victims than as agents of culturally determined views on gender. It seems, then, that in following your method, with its expectation that prayer provide liberating exits out of the dilemmas of gender theory, it can be advisable to look as closely at church history as at systematic theology, as indeed you have done elsewhere.